



Her technique and influences firmly established in the Baroque and Victorian eras, **Teresa Oaxaca** assimilates and interprets elements from other periods in art history to fashion her modern—and exuberant—worldview.

THE ART OF EXCESS

By Judith Fairly

“My work is about pleasing the eye,” says Teresa Oaxaca. Indeed, though her oeuvre includes conventional portraits in charcoal and oil and straightforward still lifes, Oaxaca’s portfolio is dominated by large canvases where every centimeter is filled with a riotous array of objects (many from her collection of antique dolls, Venetian masks, nutcrackers, china teapots and skulls that have become repertory players in these paintings) and her trademark cascade of flowers in full bloom strewn carelessly around a central figure, which is often costumed in period attire and makeup. At first glance, these paintings seem like an amusement park for the eye. With time for contemplation, however, the visual overload, the unusual pairing of objects and figures, the high-key saturated pigments and hyper-expressive subjects in sometimes inelegant poses find a deeper resonance with traditional realism, albeit a slightly transgressive version of what one might find among the old masters on a museum wall.

OPPOSITE: *Venetian Carnival*
(oil on canvas, 60x40)



DREAMS & DOLLS

The genesis of Oaxaca's singular style was a calendar of Michelangelo's frescos she saw around the age of 5 that left her daydreaming about the Sistine Chapel; further inspiration was provided by a Leonardo da Vinci exhibition when she was 13 and, by the age of 15, she was thinking of an art career. Oaxaca often wears period clothing that she has made or found online, not as an affectation or as an element of performance art but as an integral and seamless aspect of her life as an artist. She is enamored of 19th-century art and craftsmanship, of historical architecture, of Old World traditions and influences. She inhabits her work. She lives among the objects that make their way into her paint-

ings. The dolls in her paintings are from her own collection from 19th-century France and Germany.

"These dolls contain the spirit of another age and some have witnessed a period of art history very dear to me," she says.

In 2012, she embarked on a four month self-guided Grand Tour of the art capitals of Europe—visiting Budapest, Stockholm, Madrid, Prague, Vienna, Amsterdam, and Berlin. She views her activity in the studio as recording her experience and travel provides "narrative" to her work.

Shunning "photographic paint application," Oaxaca's painterly style is consonant with her belief that figural representation and realism were at their peak during the Baroque and Victorian eras, though she was inspired to paint the figure by Italian painters of the Renaissance. Other influences: William Adolphe

ABOVE: *The Party* (oil on canvas, 38x56)

RIGHT: *Standing Pierrot* (oil on canvas, 60x34)

Baroque: a style of art and architecture of the 17th and 18th century, Nurtured by the Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation, it depicted religious themes in a dramatic, dynamic and sensually rich style. (Baroque painting in Northern Europe was less concerned with religious subject matter.) Advancements in science and philosophy gave rise to an interest in the natural world, and landscape paintings cast humans in a secondary role to nature. Baroque architecture conveyed grandeur through massive scale and elaborate ornamentation. (Baroque is not to be confused with Rococo, which refers to ornate and sometimes excessive embellishment in the decorative arts.)



Bouguereau (1825-1905), Aimé Nicolas Morot (1850-1913), Antonio Mancini (1852-1930), John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) and Gustav Klimt (1862-1918). Oaxaca has said in interviews that her evolution from the atelier to her own painting style was affected by the 1987 film *Alice*, a surrealistic adaptation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, by the Czech filmmaker Jan Svankmayer. As is the case with surrealism, Oaxaca's paintings often convey viewers to a dreamlike plane where identity is unmoored, leaving the viewer to question what is real. She views

LESSONS IN CRAFT

by Teresa Oaxaca

Organizing the Palette

I prefer to lay out my colors from light to dark and warm to cool. I've become used to this arrangement, so I can send my brush or palette knife to the appropriate pile for mixing without having to think about it too consciously, thus freeing my mind for drawing and for working on values.

Earth Colors

I use a large number of earth colors, umbers and lead pigments. The earth pigments, as well as the oils that bind them, have quick drying times.

In Darkness Visible

My palette has been getting larger and brighter, in part due to all my colorful props like flowers and fabrics and face paint, but also to a change in style from tenebrism (from the Italian *tenbroso*, murky and the Latin *tenebrae*, darkness), denoting a style of painting of pronounced chiaroscuro, to a more direct approach, wherein I build color, not by glazing, but by heavier applications of paint.

Underpainting

I like to work on oil primed canvas. In

the past I used a dry warm brown or cool gray mid-tone; now I also use Maya blue. When beginning an alla prima painting or one-day sketch, I prefer to rub raw umber or Maya blue onto the canvas and then paint a medium heavy wash over the entire canvas. I then start working directly into that application. I find that I can rub out my lights easily and not commit, in the beginning stages, to any sharp lines that would distract me later. This method also helps me to work in terms of mass, because I can use light and dark to sculpt the features broadly. I don't stay at this stage for long; after about half an hour to an hour, I am ready for color.

Unifying Color

Using color on a slightly wet and raw umber-toned surface also has the advantage, at least for me, of giving my paint something to work into and "overcome." I find that I tend to key my lights and chromas very high and that the slightly swampy underpainting brings them back down to earth and gives all the colors a unity that is only apparent when I compare the work to another similar pose done straight onto a dry surface.

More information on Teresa Oaxaca's palette and materials at www.naturalpigments.com/art-supply-education/teresa-oaxaca-palette/



ABOVE: **Yule** (oil on canvas, 60x40)

OPPOSITE TOP: **Summertime** (oil on canvas, 46x32)

the dolls as “little personalities” who play a supporting role to the subject; in paintings such as *The Dollmaker* and *The Sleepwalker* (at teresaoaxaca.com), however, humans and dolls have interchangeable roles. “Dolls and miniature human sculptures go back a very long way into the roots of human civilization,” she notes. “So much psychology, design, and craftsmanship have gone into these artifacts.” The inanimate objects she incorporates among her figures also function as symbols whose meaning is ambiguous, open to interpretation.

CARNIVALE & CARMINA BURANA

Oaxaca is a versatile painter with a solid foundation in classical atelier technique acquired over four years in Italy at the Angel Academy and the Florence Academy, followed by a year-long apprenticeship with Odd Nerdrum in Norway. A recent series, *In Taberna*, inspired by a performance of Carl Orff’s cantata *Carmina Burana*, includes lush, romantic paintings with a darker palette, the yin to the yang of Oaxaca’s high-chroma and celebratory “Neo-Baroque

and Carnivale” paintings. *In Taberna* (In the Tavern) is the second of three parts in *Carmina Burana*, a favorite in the classical music repertoire based on bawdy drinking songs attributed to the *ordo vagorum*, traveling clerical students/scholars from the Middle Ages who wrote “vagabond songs” celebrating excess in all things. In paintings like *Night Scene*, Oaxaca’s raging and intoxicated subjects give expression to Orff’s “Estuans Interius”—a “burning inside.” By contrast, her cheerier versions of clowns—which she regards as both “timeless” artifacts of the Baroque era with their powdered faces and also vestigial figures with roots in commedia dell’arte and the carnival tradition—allow her to explore the commonality of human emotion. In paintings like *Laughing Queen* (page xx) Oaxaca blurs the social divide between nobility and commoner, what she cheekily refers to as her “Aristocrat/Clown genre.”

ART HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

“I paint light,” says Oaxaca, “using multiple layers to build a convincing illusion.” The setup is an important component of her process; she meticulously arranges her subjects and props to create a composition that is both planned (using her familiar repertory of objects) and spontaneous. She prefers a naturalist approach—the



Washington Baroque (oil on canvas, xxxxs) (aka “Man With A Pipe”), a wink at my new Washington, DC-inspired series of locals, will be on view at The Arts Club of Washington, starting in November 2017.

MATERIALS

BASIC PALETTE: RUBLEV COLOURS

ARTIST OILS: ultramarine blue (green shade), antica green earth, lemon ochre, chrome yellow primrose, lead-tin yellow dark, orange molybdate, Pozzuoli red, vermilion, alizarin crimson, cyprus umber raw dark, lead white #1, bone black

EXTENDED PALETTE: Maya blue, cobalt chromite blue, Verona green earth, French umber

OTHER COLORS: WINSOR & NEWTON: cadmium yellow medium, diyoazine purple

MICHAEL HARDING: cadmium red deep

OLD HOLLAND OR GAMBLIN: viridian

MEDIUMS: Oleogel, expoxide oil, aged refined linseed oil, Rublesol (odorless mineral spirits)

SURFACES: Claessens oi- primed linen rolls, Artefex oil-primed linen on ACM panel

THE ART OF THEATRE

Dionysus is the ancient Greek god of wine, revelry, ecstasy and fertility. Theatre had its origins in his worshippers' festivals that included music and dancing.

Theatre, deriving from *thea* (Greek, seeing), means "a place for seeing." *Thauma* is Greek for "miracle." The characters in Medieval mystery plays were devils and clowns.

Pantomime started in Rome. Players tell a story through actions and expressions, accompanied by music.

Pierrot is a mime, a stock character of the *Commedia dell'Arte*; his demeanor is sad; he wears a white clown's costume.

Carnival derives from the Italian *carnivale*, "removing the meat." It describes a festival of merrymaking before Lent and/or a traveling show.



depiction of realistic objects in a natural setting. Her cluttered canvases are a nod to the flattened picture plane characteristic of Medieval art and especially to the altarpieces from that period. Usually framed by elaborate carving that is a masterwork in itself, the two-dimensional altarpieces lend themselves to stylization and the use of pattern to eliminate negative space. In Gustav Klimt's devotion to pattern and the integration of decorative elements into his paintings—reconciling the natural and the artificial—Oaxaca has found a kindred spirit and an obvious inspiration for *Standing Pierrot* (see page xx).

Oaxaca constructs frames for some of

her paintings, casting a sort of artistic holism over the viewing experience. Pairing her Carousel frames, hand painted in pastel cotton-candy hues after the painted ponies of 19th century merry-go-rounds, with her Carnivale and clown and doll paintings seems like a cheery confluence of art and artisan, until one notices that the dainty bisque doll with the delicate features in *Relic* has a human skull in its lap (above).

THE PAST IS ALWAYS ALIVE

"All my evolution is taking place on the canvas and in my head—in what I see in nature and interpret in two dimensions on the picture plane," says Oaxaca. She views her art as an expression of her need for beauty and order. At times, Oaxaca sounds like an

Aesthetic Movement: a 19th century philosophy which decreed that art's value resides in its beauty and aesthetic appeal rather than in any deeper meaning ("art for art's sake"). Sometimes regarded as a revolt against the ugliness and materialism of the Industrial Age, aestheticism is a subjective approach to experience that urges adherents to seize the moment, "To burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life." (Walter Pater)



OPPOSITE: *Relic* (oil on canvas, 16x20)

ABOVE: *Laughing Queen* (oil on canvas, 56x38)

little-known qualities such as equipoise, attunement, metis, sympathy and limerence. She feels a deep fellowship with artists who “embrace any era, any movement instead of being tied to their own era,” citing the 19th century Aesthetic Movement and artists who “capture feel-

ings in a decorative way.”

She values beauty over meaning. In a classical atelier education, based on 19th century French-method academies, artists have always looked backward in history for inspiration. In that way, the past is always alive. “I do not think that art has a linear history,” says Oaxaca, “or that it continually improves.” ■

JUDITH FAIRLY writes about the visual arts and is a frequent contributor to *The Artist’s Magazine*.



MEET TERESA OAXACA

Teresa Oaxaca received a diploma from the Angel Academy of Art in Florence, Italy and did her graduate studies at the Florence Academy. She apprenticed with Odd Nerdrum in Norway and trained with Robert Liberace at the Art League of Alexandria VA. Her awards include First Honor at the Portrait Society of America (2015) and accolades from the American Museum of the Cowboy, the former Corcoran Gallery of Art, the Art Renewal Center, the Elisabeth Greenshields Foundation, the Posey Foundation, the Portrait Society of America, and the Museu Europeu D’Art Modern in Barcelona. Teresa Oaxaca exhibits her work and teaches workshops throughout the United States and in Europe.

ONLINE:

Visit Oaxaca’s website at teresaoaxaca.com.